Special report

Marketing research

Verbatim:

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Self-examination

Researchers reveal state of MR in survey

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That marketing researchers are working under tight deadlines and tighter budgets, and having increasing trouble getting enough qualified respondents to boot, would not be news to anyone in the industry.

What would surprise many research professionals is the extent to which their colleagues—much like themselves, most likely—are having trouble finding qualified people to hire. Also, many researchers feel they are falling behind in their knowledge of new technologies available to make their work better and easier.

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This, according to the results of a survey conducted last fall by Chicago-based SPSS Inc. of registered users of MarketingPower.com, the American Marketing Association's Web site.

"People say they don't know if they're being effective, or using the right technology. Because the area of scientific research relies heavily on science and technology, it's a problem if users don't have time to learn about new technology," says Mark Rodeghier, a Chicago-based independent consultant in statistical analysis and survey research hired by SPSS to analyze the survey's results.

These results were only a piece of the broad-based survey, which asked about everything from professional demographics to preferred brands to typical challenges to doing the job day by day.

"It was fascinating to analyze those results," Rodeghier says. "People in the field are always interested in challenges others face. It's somewhat encouraging to know that at least we're all in the same boat: seeing insufficient response rates, tight budgets, time constraints. In general, it's nice to have a better awareness of what marketers and researchers are doing as a whole."

SPSS conducted the survey, says Erika Woldman, senior marketing manager at SPSS, "to get a sense of where the market is today: The challenges companies are facing and what they're doing. We're looking to tag this back to our (software) products and would like to do this type of survey on a regular basis. This will be our baseline."

The survey's 1,500-plus respondents were a sample of mostly decision-makers involved in either strategy or research, Rodeghier notes. "They are able to comment knowledgeably on the marketing research activities and challenges faced by them and their organizations, which provides a level of validation for the results," he adds.

More than half of the respondents were senior managers or directors, for instance; about 27% were managers; about 19% were directors; and about 13% were CEO, president or owner. Also, about 8% said they were vice presidents; 4% were principals or partners; and about 2% were simply "executives." Also, about 11% said they were analysts. (Respondents were free to mark more than one title.)

Those in market research comprised 38.5%, while those in strategic planning and marketing represented 31.6%. Other percentages were business development/sales, 9.6%; client relations, 3.3%; data processing, 1.2%; information technologies, 0.9%; product development and testing, 1.8%; and other, 13.0%.

When it came to the types of surveys conducted, 885 responded. Of that group, 43.8% conducted telephone surveys; followed by Web surveys (39.3%); focus groups (36.8%); mail surveys (19%); e-mail surveys (11.8%); and in-person interview surveys (9.6%).

Reasons for conducting surveys followed certain trends, as well. Among the 539 individuals who responded with their reasons, satisfaction represented 42.7%; product development, 28.8%; branding, 23.0%; segmentation, 17.8%; b-to-b, 11.0%; awareness, 6.3%; tracking, 6.0%; and concept testing, 5.5%.

The survey also asked which software programs respondents used. Of the 366 individuals who mentioned a type of software, 69.8% said they used SPSS software; 20.1% said Excel; 9.4%, SAS; 4.7%, Sawtooth Software; 4.3%, Wincross; 4.3%, Quantum; 1.4%, Minitab.

"From the context in which Excel was mentioned, it was clear that many of (those 20%) used Excel to calculate statistics, not just for graphing," Rodeghier says.

In answer to this question, 17.6% of the respondents indicated "other survey software," a category that included Portland, Ore.-based SurveyMonkey.com LLC and St. Louis Park, Minn.-based MarketTools Inc.'s product Zoomerang.

The survey explored the challenges facing those conducting research, and found that the landscape is similar for most everyone. The top-most challenge overall is garnering a sufficient response rate.

When asked to rank five challenges on a scale of one to five—with 5 as "very challenging" and 1 as "not at all challenging"—38.7% ranked "maximizing survey participation and completion rates" as a 5. Also considered "very challenging" were: reaching a representative sample of respondents (according to 30.2% of respondents); providing surveys in the format most desired for the respondent (10.2%); designing or authoring the survey (12.0%); analyzing results (17.6%); and coding or quantifying survey operations (18.6%).

Next-most challenging, ranked 4 on a 5-point scale, was maximizing survey participation and completion rates (36.0%); reaching a representative sample of respondents (33.3%); providing surveys in the format

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Many in field share common hurdles

most desired for the respondent (23.4%); analyzing results (28.1%); coding or quantifying survey operations (26.5%).

The survey also explored the pressures being brought to bear on marketing research that affect how research is conducted. The need to "reduce costs" was considered the biggest hurdle by 39.3% of respondents. After that were: reduce time in achieving results (35.4%); improve the data collection process (28.1%); conduct effective research online (22.6%); take advantage of technology (22.2%); improve skill sets of internal staff (20.9%); automation of processes (20.7%); reduce time to create a survey (20.4%); reduce errors in data collection or coding (20.2%); improve the process of coding data (8.6%); hire staff (7.3%); outsourcing (5.8%); and other (5.5%).

In write-in responses to the survey, some respondents were more specific about what their concerns were.

Bob Fichter, vice president of business development for Milwaukee-based Dieringer Research Group Inc., cited cost pressures, declining response rates and outsourcing. He explains that consumers' confusion about the difference between research surveyors and telemarketers makes researchers' jobs harder. "We need to educate consumers that we do research so we can develop better products, because if no one will talk to us, we have nothing to analyze. Diminishing response rates turn into added costs, clients look for more from less money—then they think of outsourcing, and there's pressure on us to show what we offer that outsourcing firms cannot," he says.

Adding to the confusion between research and telemarketing, notes Fichter, are companies that sell under the guise of research. "You have to pay them $100 or whatever to become part of their 'exclusive panel'—just another factor telling consumers that research and telemarketing are the same thing."

Finding research staff with the proper business acumen to "see the forest for the trees" and not get bogged down in modeling rather than conclusions was a challenge mentioned by Michele Goetz, director for b-to-b high-tech and media for comScore Q2, a division of Reston, Va.-based comScore Networks Inc. "You're doing research to answer a question, and you don't want the marketers' eyes to glaze over because the figures contain no 'a-ha's,'" Goetz notes. "But the skill sets of the research analysts are weak in several areas, particularly in report writing. I receive too many reports containing 'elevator' analysis: 'This went up and this went down.' That's very shallow analysis!"

For more information on the companies mentioned in this story, go to:

◆ *www.comscore.com* (comScore Q2)
◆ *www.thedrg.com* (Dieringer Research Group Inc.)
◆ *www.spss.com* (SPSS Inc.)